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# Music and Language Learning

By [Kristina Robertson \(/author/kristina-robertson\)](/author/kristina-robertson)

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*"We are the music makers and we are the dreamers of dreams." – Arthur O'Shaughnessy (as quoted in the film, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory)*

Before "high stakes tests" were invented, teachers created their own "high stakes tests." My high school civics teacher required that each student write from memory the preamble to the Constitution in order to pass the class. If you recall, the preamble starts, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union..." and goes on for about six lines.

Thankfully, all my years of watching TV were not a total waste of time (as my mother warned me they would be). I had watched the *School House Rock* series on Saturday mornings and remembered a cartoon and song with the preamble to the Constitution in the lyrics. I sang that song to myself during the test and passed with ease. This memory has always reinforced to me that music can be a strong tool for memorization and learning new information.

Language learning offers a unique and exciting opportunity to integrate music. Many people have had the experience of learning a world language and singing simple, silly songs in class. The introduction of music provides a light-hearted and fun way to interact with another language and culture.

## Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom

In fact, music and language are linked in Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The multiple intelligences theory states that there are eight basic ways that people are "smart." In this case, "smart" is defined as the strengths that each learner has in acquiring new information. The eight intelligences are:

- Linguistic intelligence (word smart)
- Logical-mathematical intelligence (number/reasoning smart)
- Spatial intelligence (picture smart)
- Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (body smart)
- Musical and Linguistic intelligence (music and language smart)
- Interpersonal intelligence (people smart)
- Intrapersonal intelligence (self smart)
- Naturalist intelligence (nature smart)

Using the multiple intelligences in teaching, a teacher can present content with a variety of activities in the lesson to appeal to students' various strengths. For example, in a social studies lesson on the Great Depression, a teacher may engage students with logical-

mathematical intelligence by presenting a problem that a family faced due to their income and the things they needed to buy to survive. To engage students with interpersonal intelligence, the teacher may want to set up group work or role play activities. Musical and linguistic intelligence could be supported by listening to and analyzing popular songs from the times. Every person has these intelligences, but we all have our preferences and strengths, so a lesson plan that includes a variety of activities is bound to capture students' attention and facilitate learning.

In addition, it's worth noting that different kinds of activities may give ELLs an opportunity to participate in ways that build their confidence or fit their learning styles — a student who is shy or insecure may surprise with you a music or art assignment!

## Integrating Music

Music can also be a creative way to enhance student writing. I like to play soft music when my students are doing a writing activity. This helps to establish a calm environment for students to focus and relax while they organize their thoughts and choose their words.

I've also used a variety of music to assist students in expanding vocabulary and learning synonyms. For example, I play a selection of soft classical music and have the students write down all the adjectives that come to mind. When they finish writing, I have them share the words they wrote down. Students often have quite a variety of words that they can share and teach each other. For more advanced students, this creates a wonderful opportunity to discuss the subtle nuances of words. For example, students discuss the difference between words such as, "sorrow" and "sad" or "calm" and "peaceful." I then introduce more varieties of music to elicit angry, excited, or happy vocabulary.

A fun listening activity to use with older students is to bring in a recording of a song and give the students a handout with every seventh or tenth word missing. Play the song and see how many blanks the students are able to fill in. This is very challenging because the lyrics go very fast, and the pronunciation and stress are different than in spoken language. My students have always loved this activity and usually want to listen to the song a couple of times to see if they can get all the words. If you are willing to perform, students also like to sing the song once they have all the words.

Finally, music can be a powerful tool for learning new concepts or memorizing information. Lisa Grigorieff, a kindergarten and first grade teacher, wrote in her bright idea of how to use music to learn the alphabet. She uses the tune from "Who let the dogs out? (woof, woof, woof)" and instead uses the alphabet. For example, "Who let the A out?" Young students get to sing and dance while repeating alphabet letters using a modern, catchy tune. She uses visual materials from the reading curriculum to reinforce the learning. Grigorieff says, "[the students] retained the letter sounds faster than peers in the same grade who did not do this song, and went up on DIBELS scoring with Nonsense word fluency."

## Building Upon Students' Culture

Another important way to tie together language learning and music is by building upon musical traditions that are part of students' cultures. ELLs may be able to talk or write about these traditions for a class project, or compare songs or nursery rhymes from different countries. Parents can also play a fun part in this activity by sharing songs with the class or at a parent night event. Most importantly, however, parents need to be reminded of the benefits of sharing these songs with their own children — from preserving their own family traditions and developing students' self-esteem [building early literacy skills \(/article/81/\)](/article/81/).

## Pulling It All Together

There are many interesting ways to use music to facilitate language learning, and I encourage you to explore different options that will work for you and your students. You may want to visit the hotlinks in this section to find the wide variety of lyrics, songs and lesson activities that are available on the Web. By introducing music as part of learning, you bring to your students a powerful and long-lasting memory tool that they can rely on in future learning situations.

I know how powerful music can be. I would love to replace all the 70s TV theme songs and advertising jingles that are permanently stuck in my head with more valuable information. (Okay Mom, you were a little right about the TV, but at least some of it was educational.) To my teachers' credit, I still remember some educational content as related to songs we

learned — *Big John* (coal mines), *Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal*, and *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*, to name a few. I hope you have a great response from your students when you introduce music in learning, and who knows? Maybe twenty years from now they'll still have those songs in their heads!

## Hot links

### [The Best Music Websites For Learning English](http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/30/the-best-music-websites-for-learning-english/)

[\(http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/30/the-best-music-websites-for-learning-english/\)](http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/01/30/the-best-music-websites-for-learning-english/)

Larry Ferlazzo shares his favorite sites for using music to help students learn English.

### [Using Music to Help Children Learn Languages](http://blog.languagelizard.com/2012/03/05/using-music-to-help-children-learn-languages/)

[\(http://blog.languagelizard.com/2012/03/05/using-music-to-help-children-learn-languages/\)](http://blog.languagelizard.com/2012/03/05/using-music-to-help-children-learn-languages/)

This blog post offers ideas for using music to help children learn new languages.

### [Using Music to Teach Language to ELLS \(http://everythingesl-](http://everythingesl-everythingesl.blogspot.com/2011/04/using-bilingual-music-to-teach-language.html)

[everythingesl.blogspot.com/2011/04/using-bilingual-music-to-teach-language.html\)](http://everythingesl-everythingesl.blogspot.com/2011/04/using-bilingual-music-to-teach-language.html)

ELL expert Judie Haynes shares discussion about switching between two languages when singing in bilingual classrooms.

### [Writing Development of ELL Students in a Music Classroom](http://www.slideshare.net/flutist3/writing-development-of-ell-students-in-a-music-classroom#btnNext)

[\(http://www.slideshare.net/flutist3/writing-development-of-ell-students-in-a-music-classroom#btnNext\)](http://www.slideshare.net/flutist3/writing-development-of-ell-students-in-a-music-classroom#btnNext)

Music teacher Valerie Erickson-Mesias shares some of her ideas for connect music to writing instruction for ELLs in this presentation.

### [Kennedy Arts \(ArtsEdge\) \(http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/\)](http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/)

ARTSEDGE, the National Arts and Education Network, provides the tools to develop interdisciplinary curricula that fully integrate the arts with other academic subjects. ARTSEDGE offers free, standards-based teaching materials, as well as professional development resources, student materials, and guidelines for arts-based instruction and assessment.

José-Luis Orozco: Spanish Children's Music (<http://joseluisorozco.com/>).

José-Luis Orozco is an author and recording artist whose work draws upon the rich heritage of the Spanish-speaking world. Through his music, José-Luis has sought to expose a wider audience to Spanish-language children's traditions and promote Latin American culture. These cds are excellent tools for young children.

Putumayo World Music (<http://www.putumayo.com/>).

Putumayo World Music was established to introduce people to the music of the world's cultures. The Putumayo Kids division was created to introduce children to other cultures through fun, upbeat world music.

Songs for Teaching (<http://www.songsforteaching.com/>).

This site has lots of downloadable lyrics, sound clips, sheet music, and teaching suggestions. Full songs are available for purchase.

Musical and Linguistic Lesson Plan  
(<http://www.towson.edu/%7Ewizer/501/milp3.htm>)

This page is an example of a lesson plan that integrates music and language.

Report: Arts as a Tool for Teachers of English Language Learners  
([http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/Art as a Tool-for Teachers.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/docs/Art%20as%20a%20Tool-for%20Teachers.pdf))

This report from the New York State Department of Education explores the linguistic, academic, and social-emotional benefits of using arts education with ELLs.

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